

Obituaries

William Blum, policy critic of U.S. praised by Osama bin Laden, dies at 85

By Emily Langer

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For years, William Blum toiled largely without notice on writings in which he railed against the imperialism of U.S. foreign policy. He won the admiration of Noam Chomsky, the noted linguist and intellectual, but even left-wing publications such as the Nation declined to publish his works, Mr. Blum said, because they judged him too fanatical.

But in 2006 he received an unexpected boost, when terrorist Osama bin Laden plugged Mr. Blum's book "Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower" (2000) in one of the audio messages that the al-Qaeda leader periodically released. In short order, the volume jumped to No. 26 — from No. 205,763 — on Amazon.com's ranking of most-ordered books. A mention from bin Laden, Mr. Blum quipped to The Washington Post at the time, was "almost as good as being an Oprah book."

Mr. Blum, who carried on after his burst of fame just as he had done before it, denouncing what he regarded as the transgressions of the U.S. government and its military and national-security apparatus, died Dec. 9 at a hospice center in Arlington, Va., at 85. The cause was kidney failure, said his son, Alexander Blum.

To his critics, Mr. Blum was little more than a gadfly, albeit one whose buzzing was amplified by the most infamous terrorist of the modern era. To his admirers, he was a rare truth-teller about such matters as U.S. military aggression, the country's unquestioning support of Israel and its support of dictators or toppling of social movements for political convenience.

"From 1945 to the end of the [20th] century," he wrote in "Rogue State," "the United States attempted to overthrow more than 40 foreign governments, and to crush more than 30 populist-nationalist movements struggling against intolerable regimes. In the process, the U.S. caused the end of life for several million people, and condemned many millions more to a life of agony and despair."

Mr. Blum had not always occupied the extreme left of political thought. He began his adult life as an anti-Communist and came to Washington to work for the State Department, where he did computer programming in the 1960s. By his account, U.S. conduct during the Vietnam War "soured" him on "being part of the foreign policy establishment."

He left the government in 1967 and began a second career as a roving freelance journalist and writer. He lived in Chile during the Socialist government of Salvador Allende, who was overthrown in a 1973 U.S.-backed coup.

Later that decade, according to a biography on his website, Mr. Blum worked with Philip Agee, a former CIA agent and author of the 1975 book-length critique "Inside the Company: CIA Diary," on his efforts to expose what they regarded as the agency's crimes.

Mr. Blum's books included "The CIA: A Forgotten History" (1986), "Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II" (1995), "West-Bloc Dissident: A Cold War Memoir" (2002), "Freeing the World to Death: Essays on the American Empire" (2005) and "America's Deadliest Export: Democracy — The Truth About U.S. Foreign Policy and Everything Else" (2013).

The message from bin Laden mentioning Mr. Blum's book appeared midway through the second term of President George W. Bush, who led the United States to war in Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that killed nearly 3,000 people.

"If Bush decides to carry on with his lies and oppression," bin Laden said, "then it would be useful for you to read the book 'Rogue State,' which states in its introduction: 'If I were president, I would stop the attacks on the United States: First, I would give an apology to all the widows and orphans and those who were tortured. Then I would announce that American interference in the nations of the world has ended once and for all.'"

(Bin Laden erred in attributing that passage to "Rogue State"; it in fact came from "Freeing the World to Death.")

Mr. Blum, for his part, condemned the 9/11 attacks and conceded that he had no desire to live under a regime that followed bin Laden's ideology. "The oppression of women," he told Salon in 2006. "The whole thing turns me off." But he conveyed no regret at receiving the compliment from bin Laden, who was later killed by U.S. forces in Pakistan, and he welcomed the attention it brought to his books.

"The people who have interviewed me in the last few days, they keep pressing me to say how repulsed I am to get a plug from Osama bin Laden," he said after the recording was made public. "I am not repulsed."

William Henry Blum, a son of Jewish immigrants from Poland, was born in Brooklyn on March 6, 1933. His father was a machine operator at a paper factory, and his mother was a homemaker.

Mr. Blum received a bachelor's degree in accounting from the Baruch College of the City University of New York in 1955. After leaving the State Department, he helped start the Washington Free Press, a short-lived underground publication. Later in life, he tried his hand at screenwriting while residing in California.

"Unfortunately, his screenplays all had two (if not three) strikes against them because they dealt with those things which makes grown men run away screaming in Hollywood: ideas and issues," read a tribute to him on the website of CovertAction magazine, where he was a regular contributor.

Mr. Blum was separated from his wife, Adelheid Zöfel. Besides their son, of Berlin, survivors include two grandsons.

Among Mr. Blum's his final writings was an entry in September on his blog, the Anti-Empire Report. His goal, he had told The Post when bin Laden brought him to renown, was "if not ending, at least slowing down the American Empire. At least injuring the beast."

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Emily Langer is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. She writes about extraordinary lives in national and international affairs, science and the arts, sports, culture, and beyond. She previously worked for the Outlook and Local Living sections. Follow >

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